

Uhl Eharl Khoehng

By Patricia A. Jackson

Twin tridents of lightning surged across the low-lying skies of Iscera. The congested atmosphere bled through in clotted tones of red and orange, as volatile gases reacted with the charged violence of the storm. Torrential gusts of wind and wet snow buffeted the hull of the *Prodigal*, layering the freighter with a secondary armor plate of thick ice. Bearing no exterior signature or running lights, the YT-1300 sat alone on an exposed pad, isolated from the main traffic of the Iscerian spaceport.

Lightning briefly illuminated the interior of the *Prodigal's* bridge. Fable Astin sat tentatively, contemplating the storm. Exhausted and sickened, the young Jedi ran her fingers through the matted tangle of her hair, draping the unruly mane over her shoulders. The tapered waistline of her flight jacket accentuated her slender waist and the lengthy lines of her legs and thighs. She winced irritably, shifting position to relieve the pinch of her gray pirate leggings, which had gathered in the backs of her knees. The slight motion rattled the heavy blaster at her hip and caused the lightsaber to fall into the cushion beside her.

Fable flipped the comm switch for the tenth time, waiting for the computer to bring up the stored message from the ship's logs. The featureless image emerged from the mini-holovid, realigning itself into the face and upper torso of a woman. Prematurely gray with the burden of command, auburn hair curled at the shoulders of her uniform, which bore the insignia of a Rebel Alliance officer. "Greetings Captain Astin and to your Harrier Infiltration team. This is Commander Beatonn of the Rebel frigate, *V'nnuk'rk*." Beatonn paused briefly, interrupted by the distant blare of a proximity alarm. "Your objective is very clear, captain. The Empire has begun construction on a communications bunker on Nysza III. Your orders are to destroy the bunker before it can be completed. Good luck, captain, and may the Force be with you." The holo-communication ended amid static discharge and interference.

Fable toggled the erasure switch, deleting the transmission. It was a duty long overdue. Nearly 17 hours had passed since the completion of their objective, which had resulted in the untimely death of her technical officer, Arecelis Acosta. "Did you know that he was half human?"

"I'd heard rumors," Deke Holman replied. The auxiliary control lights cast a surreal aura over his handsome but grim face and the shock of fiery, red hair crowning his cumbersome head. A Socorran, he was dark-skinned and rugged, wearing the traditional gold hoop in his left ear lobe. Still damp from their misadventure on Nysza III, he leaned forward and stared into the holographic etching secured on the viewscreen. He recognized his own stout figure, framed on each side by his companions. On the right, his captain and friend, Fable Astin, smiled as he tickled her neck. To the left, Arecelis Acosta was playfully feigning a punch.

The Coynite was nearly 2.2 meters tall, powerfully built at the chest and shoulders. His body was covered with a fine blanket of blue-black fur, which was intricately braided around his neck and ears. In the etching, his thick fingers grasped at Deke's forearm, easily making the circumference of his flesh. Arecelis' other hand was balled into a fist as the Coynite feigned an incoming punch.

Deke shook his head, thoughtfully pursing his thick lips. "I'm really going to miss him." He sniffed disdainfully, slumping against the back of the acceleration chair. "No wonder there was no security in that bunker. Who would have thought a Jedi would be there?" Rubbing his forehead, he sighed, "At least you were with us."

"Didn't do Arecelis much good," Fable scoffed. Her body was bruised from her momentary encounter with Vialco, a dark Jedi assigned to the garrison. One feint and one block was all he needed to launch her across the width of the construction corridor. Trembling with rage, all Fable could do was stare up at him, as his mocking laughter echoed through the empty ceiling tiles above the complex. Her limited skills were no challenge to him and she had undermined herself by drawing her lightsaber in anger, opening herself to the dark side.

"Smells like a gundark crawled into the nav computer and died. It reeks in here!" The exasperated Jedi threw her gloves onto the console, acutely aware of the stench permeating the bridge. During their escape from the bunker, they had been forced to dive into a construction tunnel full of stagnant water. The scent was prolific. "We need to get out of here. Is there a bar or something in town?"

"This is pretty much a dry world, capt'n," Deke replied. "But when I went to pick up those rations, I passed a little theater on the boulevard. Evidently, it's the last show before the winter break and the owners are giving away tickets."

"Did you get any?"

"Didn't have much of a choice. The kid nearly knocked me down, trying to give the last two away."

"What's it called?"

Posing valiantly, Deke stood up and put his hand over his chest. In a deep voice, he declared, "*For the Want of an Empire.*"

"Wonderful," Fable grumbled, leading the way out of the flight cabin. "I can't wait to see this."

* * *

Against the elaborate backdrop of the stage, the clashing of swords echoed from the inner recesses of the set. The dual ended abruptly, with the edge of one prop sword slicing cleanly through the other, detonating the small charge inside to provide the dramatic effect of a lightsaber exploding through metal. Panting and fatigued, the actors separated, retreating to the far edges of the mock cave.

Fable focused on the mesmerizing movements of the lead actor. A subtle trick in the theater lighting enhanced the malevolence of his character, a tragic hero bent on destroying his one-time friend and companion. Captivated by the last moments of the scene, she sat on the edge of her seat, waiting for him to speak.

The audience gasped as the sword sliced the air only millimeters from one actor's face, feigning the dreaded death blow. As his rival died at his feet, the hero turned toward the audience. "Come my good fellows," he announced in a clear, resonating tone, "let us part this sad scene, and through our good company, make the journey shorter." The curtain closed as the stagehands emerged to reset for the final act.

Fable sat back in her chair. "Did you see that?" She covered her mouth, laughing anxiously into her hand. "His technique is almost flawless." Scanning the glossy holo-program, she whispered, "What's his name?"

"Jaalib Brandl."

"I want to meet him." Turning on the wary Socorran, she squeezed his knees tightly. "You speak Iscerian, don't you? Talk to the owner."

Grumbling under his breath, Deke moved away from his seat and toward the aisle. "I'll see what I can do."

Through most of the final act, Fable sat with the actor's image across her lap, comparing the picture with every minute expression of his youthful, almost adolescent face. The Force was with him and she felt it, moving through the audience with a tangible presence.

She marveled at the dangerous parallel dimensions of reality and the play, where a young councilman began a slow rise into the inner circles of high government, only to discover corruption in every facet of its existence. In act two, he initiated a campaign to end the deterioration of the bureaucracy. But as his vision expanded in the third act, it became a ruthless autocracy, bent on exterminating its enemies and all who opposed it.

For the final scene, the hero stood alone in a splintered universe of his creation, devoid of hope, life, family, or friends. In a final affirmation, gazing out over the audience, he briefly met her eyes and held her captive. On his dying breath, he gasped, "For the want of an empire ... all humanity was lost."

Collapsing to the stage floor, the hero perished amid a thunderous echo of applause. Fable was one of the first to stand, eagerly applauding the performance, and joined the audience's shouted accolades as the minor characters returned to the stage to take their bows. From the side wall, she spotted Deke waving for her to join him in the aisle.

"Come on," Deke whispered, leading her out of a side door. "Most of the actors stay and hobnob with the audience; but a stagehand told me that Brandl's already heading back to his quarters."

"There he is!" Fable shouted, as the door slammed shut behind them. "That's him!" she gushed, recognizing the actor's costume robes. "Brandl!" she shouted, sliding down the icy stairwell. "Jaalib Brandl?"

The actor hesitated as the young woman scampered across the ice toward him. She was moving too rapidly for the footing, sliding precariously with every stride. Dropping his bag, Jaalib stepped forward as her legs slipped from beneath her, anchoring the young woman in his arms. "That was quite an entrance," he teased.

"That was quite a performance!" Fable countered. Flushing crimson with embarrassment, she stepped away from him and laughed nervously, covering her reaction with a smile. "Where did you learn to use a sword like that?"

"An actor needs a variety of exotic skills," Jaalib replied with a grin. "It's the only way to insure longevity in this profession." Retrieving his bag, he whispered, "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a long flight ahead of me tomorrow. Good night, Miss ... Miss ... " .

"Fable. Fable Astin."

"Good night, Miss Astin." His smile deepened. "Fable."

"Good night," Fable sighed, watching the outline of his robes vanish in the shadows of the theater courtyard. Teeth chattering, she stared into the darkness for a long moment.

"Come on, Fable!" Deke complained. "It's freezing out here. Let's get back to the ship."

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The pressure in Fable's lungs was building rapidly. Trapped by stormtroopers in the construction tube, she was desperate to find a quick escape for her infiltration team. They were 15 minutes off schedule with a load of thermal detonators on their backs, each timed to go off in less than 40 minutes, regardless of their safety. If they did not reach the objective site soon, no one would be alive to complete their mission.

Fable reached in front of her, tapping Arcelis on the shoulder. As the Coynite turned, his features began to distend and shift, blending into the harsh, angular jaw of Vialco, the dark Jedi they would later encounter in the command station. "Had you given yourself to the passion, he might still be alive," he taunted. "Your feelings can do little for him now." Yanking the lightsaber from her belt, Fable lunged savagely. She faked a left feint, deftly bringing the lightsaber down and across to the right.

"That's it, girl! Anger is the control. Your fear is the power. And your fear is great, little one." His voice reverberated through the darkness, washing over her consciousness. "You have taken your first small steps toward the ultimate ecstasy. Now awake and open yourself to the true power."

He's in my room! Fable thought frantically, struggling with the nightmare. The lightsaber flared in her grip, burning her hand, and she dropped it to the floor. As the weapon clanked against the deck plates, Fable woke frantically to find herself standing in the center of her cabin. She recoiled in horror when she saw her seared palm. Dropping to the floor, Fable curled into a fetal ball on the floor and rocked from side to side, desperate to quell the pain. The young Jedi called on the power of the Force to control the injury; but the throbbing wound's anger did not subside, nor did she feel the sense of inner peace that came with the summoning of the Force.

Fumbling with the light control beside her bunk, Fable cradled her injured hand against her. She snatched the lightsaber from the deck and threw it into the mirror, shattering glass fragments across the small personal gear locker. Stumbling to the sink unit, she tripped the sensor; stifling a scream as the jets blew cool, moist air over the cauterized wound. As the soothing jets blew over her and her tears, she slumped to the floor. In one moment of grief, one step from the path of light, she had changed the course of her future, betraying herself, her love of the Jedi, and the teachings of her mother.

On the table beside her bunk, the holo-image of her mother grinned inanely at her. In the fragmented remains of the mirror, Fable saw that same face, younger and smoother; but there was something noticeably sinister about the features -- her features.

"Fable!" She heard the frantic pitch in Deke's voice as the Socorran hurried through the cabin hatch. Pulling herself up from the floor, she slowly moved along with him as he guided her to the bunk. "What happened?" he gasped, examining the ugly wound carved into her flesh.

"It was him," Fable whispered. "He was here."

"Who?" the Socorran demanded, wrapping the burn in sterile gauze.

"Vialco. At least that's what he calls himself." She winced as the burn pulled at the tender skin. "He's coming for me. To turn me to the dark side. And there's nothing I can do to stop him!"

Ignorant of the Jedi's true troubles, Deke snarled, "You know I'll go down with you, capt'n. What do you need me to do?"

Hiding her frightened face beneath the shadow of her long hair, she whispered, "Deke, I need you to run a background check on Jaalib Brandl. Do you have access to the civilian database?"

"Having access and getting access is the same thing to me. But how's that going to help, Fable?"

"Please Deke, I can't explain it right now," she whispered, perceiving the jealous glint in his eyes.

Deke nodded, rising to his feet. "I'm on it."

Heavy snow blanketed the exterior lots of the Iscera spaceport, throwing layer upon downy layer over the hulls of the freighters docked in the outer arena. The steady flow of large, cumbersome flakes cut visibility nearly in half, hampering Fable's efforts to see through the viewscreen into the internal docking bays nearby. "What have you found?" she asked, sitting down in the co-pilot's chair. A cup of soup warmed her good hand, bringing a small measure of strength to her exhausted body.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Deke sighed. Staring into the terminal, he watched the information scroll across the screen. "The civilian logs don't show very much. Jaalib Brandl, 17 years old, orphaned at age 12. No known relatives within the Imperial sectors. Lived with a family friend, Otias Atori, and then left to pursue a career in theater. There were no records of him even existing before the age of 12." He sat back in the chair. "That's when I got suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Fable probed. "Why?"

"The Imperials have a sneaky practice of creating people, swapping records to implant operatives among the populace. The only way to trace them is through their records. If you look hard enough, every once in a while," he smirked confidently, "you'll find a hole."

"Like no records before a certain age?"

"Uh-huh. So I started cross-referencing in that Imperial database we intercepted. Only I forgot to use his first name. Look what came 'up.'" The image of an older man appeared on the screen. There was a brooding, sinister edge to his handsome face, a piercing glare and an arrogant smirk that gave the impression that he was posing. "See any family resemblance?"

"Lord Adalric Brandl," Fable read the information. "An actor?"

"And this was his biggest and best role yet." Deke tapped the control panel. A restricted information bar flashed across the screen as he accessed the code.

Fable set her cup aside, afraid that her trembling hands might spill the hot liquid into her lap. "An Imperial Inquisitor? Brandl's father is a Jedi-killer?"

"The Alliance has official notices about this maniac all over the network. Avoid at all costs, executive order 2354. This guy was bad news."

"Was?"

"Evidently Brandl went rogue and took off, prompting a galaxy-wide manhunt. They found him," Deke shuddered, "following a string of corpses that he left from one sector to the next. And when they finally caught him, he went berserk and committed suicide." The status line scrolled over the image of Brandl's face, flashing the word "deceased" across the screen.

"What's that?" Fable pointed to the corner of the terminal.

"It's an Imperial code about notifying next of kin. This one means the body was never recovered."

"Never recovered? Never recovered by the family or never found?"

"Can't tell you, capt'n: Wasn't there."

Fable strummed her fingers lightly against her thigh, feeling the lightsaber's slight weight against her hip.

"I've seen that look before," Deke grumbled pensively. Fumbling with the control panel, he reached into the mass confusion of the circuitry boards beneath the shield generator controls and retrieved a dusty bottle of Socorran raava. "Here," he gave it to her. Then removing the earring from his lobe, he handed the golden hoop to her as well. "I noticed the port manager is Socorran. Give him the earring and tell him you need a ship. Then give him the bottle and let him know that he can discuss the terms with me."

Fable wiped at her cheek, feeling the moisture beneath her fingertips. "You're a good friend, Deke." -

"That's what they tell me," he sighed, propping his legs against the console. "Now go on," he fussed, "before I change my mind."

Quietly, Fable walked into the corridor beyond the flight bridge.

"Fable?" Deke whispered, as she hesitated, lingering beneath the bulkhead. "If Brandl's alive, he's got nothing to lose."

"At this point, Deke, neither do I."

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The hyperdrive cue pulsed, startling Fable to consciousness. She rubbed at the bruise swelling on her forehead where she had knocked it soundly against the canopy of the X-wing. "No bad dreams?" she sighed with a half smile. From above, an abrupt movement distracted her and before she could utter one sound, the body of Arecelis came crashing through the cockpit shield, bringing the icy grasp of space. As the air was drawn from her lungs, Vialco stood over her, straddling the cockpit and mocking her with his deep, throaty laughter.

Fable shrieked, slapping hysterically at the mutilated corpse cradled in her lap; but there was nothing there. Frantically craning her neck to get a full view of the outside canopy, she saw nothing but the brilliant lines and colors of hyperspace, as they began to retract into the tell-tale pinpoints of distant planets and stars. Reeling from the traumatic nightmare, she collapsed against the acceleration chair.

The emerald-gold face of Trulalis emerged before her as the X-wing materialized from hyperspace. Quickly engaging the engines, she braced for the atmospheric entry. Scanning her sensors, Fable checked the data screens, which were inundated with immediate life sign readings. The sensors began tracing the ion signature, automatically pinpointing the trace of a light shuttle. Setting a similar course, she eventually landed outside the perimeter of a small settlement.

From the ground, Trulalis was breathtaking and majestic. Fable found herself captivated by the noble black trees whose leaves radiated a green hue when struck by direct sunlight. With massive, arching branches, the trees formed a shaded corridor above the overgrown trail. Enjoying the quiet walk, Fable rechecked her sensor information, confirming that the life signs she had received were mostly animal in nature. The settlement structures the computer had uncovered were void of any life. As she came closer, it was apparent why.

Strewn about the outskirts of the common, she found the remains of stormtrooper armor. There were no bodies inside, but the unmistakable blast scoring across the chests were disturbing evidence of a failed retaliation against the Empire, as were the skeletal remains of their victims, which were half-buried in the loose top soil nearby. At the settlement gates, she stared into the desolate streets where wreckage and debris were scattered from one end of the broad avenue to the next.

The body of a small bantha lay in the doorway of a narrow shelter. Shrunken and thin, its thick hide had been preserved by the nurturing Trulalis soil. Manicured gardens had gone to seed, spreading erratically over the front lawns and the dilapidated remains of the abandoned cottages. In one shelter, Fable found the transport shuttle, which had been assigned to Jaalib - she knew she was on the right track.

The only true survivor of the Imperial onslaught sat in the center of the settlement. Its shadow stood over her in silent testament of its endurance. Fable stared up and up, until her eyes could take in the enormity of the ancient theater. Blast scoring had scarred the pristine limestone obelisk, leaving a blemish of tragedy etched into the elaborate design. Hemmed in by stone fences and gates, the gardens were immaculately trimmed and manicured, tapered back from the winding garden paths, which wound and curved into the enormous entrance. Two stone pillars framed the central portal, casting grotesque, disembodied shadows over the archway.

Mustering her courage, she stepped into the immense antechamber. Her eyes took in the magnificence of tapestries and display cases, each showing the relics of prop swords, ornate jewelry, and costumes used in the various stage productions. She heard voices echoing from the right wing and followed instinctively, attuned to the familiar strength of Jaalib's voice.

"You are a thief, a liar, and a pawn!" Jaalib spat in a frantic voice. Fable hesitated in the doorway, staring across the darkened auditorium.

"A thief? A liar? A pawn?" another voice commented. "Are these not the greatest virtues of any good king?"

"Virtue--" Jaalib broke off, his face contorted in an uncharacteristic mask of rage.

"Your concentration is off," the stranger whispered. "Perhaps we're moving too quickly."

"No, it's me!" The despondent sound of his voice echoed in the dusty spaces above the stage. "I keep seeing you, hearing you play the part and then," he stumbled, "I see my own clumsy attempts." Anxiously brushing a hand through his dark hair, he managed a weak smile. "Perfection is never easy, Father, especially when it's your perfection."

From his throne, in the shadowed backset of the stage, Adalric Brandl chuckled softly. The rustling of his cumbersome, black robes sent whispering vibrations over the front rows as he stepped down from the raised dais. "Of all the tragedies ever conceived, *Uhl Eharl Khoehng* is the greatest," Brandl said with conviction. "The role of the Edjian-Prince is the most difficult and the actor who plays it," he paused, "is assured greatness."

"How old were you? The first time you performed it?"

"I was nearly 30 before Otias would even permit me to read for the part." Brandl snorted with warm pleasure. "You are a young man, Jaalib." Placing a comforting hand on Jaalib's shoulders, he whispered, "You were born for this part. Give yourself time to grow into it."

Recognizing Brandl's profile, Fable slowly walked down the center aisle toward the stage. Hands crossed shamefully in front of her, she met Brandl's curious eyes as his gaze fell over her. "Lord Brandl..." she faltered, staring into the shadows.

"Fable!" Jaalib hissed. Jumping down from the platform, he charged her, robes billowing from his shoulders. "What are you doing here?" Fable could hear his voice, but only distantly. She could feel the harsh pinch of his fingers on her wrists, but felt no pain. Caught in Brandl's intense gaze, she could not move. His presence was overpowering and Fable found herself deeply intrigued by the somber charm and magnificence of this strange man, himself a tragic hero, trapped in the torrent of some inconceivable drama.

Her eyes cautiously traced the noble angle of his forehead and brow, noting the gentle curvature of his nose, his mouth, and the regal set of his chin. Faint laugh lines framed thin, pale lips, fading into the surrounding tautness of his cheekbones. Waves of black hair betrayed streaks of silver running through the closely cropped sides, shadowing Brandl's solemn face. At his right temple, obtuse veins of scar tissue erupted from the otherwise smooth skin, winding a cruel path around the outer edges of his eye. Severely traumatized, the eye itself was damaged, sheathed in the pupilless, irisless remains of a clear, yellowed orb.

"Fable!" Jaalib shouted, shaking her.

"Jaalib," Brandl whispered, "mind your manners. An audience, even an audience of one, is always to be treasured and respected."

Glaring at her, Jaalib hissed, "You shouldn't have come here!" Fable glanced at him briefly and then moved away, refusing to acknowledge that she agreed with him.

"An admirer, Jaalib?"

"Yes, Father, but she was just leaving." Before Jaalib could herd her back up the aisle, he felt the light restraint of his father's hands.

Drawn to the innocence of the young woman's frightened eyes, Brandl closed the distance between them. With hesitation, he caressed Fable's smooth cheek, gently lifting her chin to raise her eyes. Astonished by the strength in her gaze, Brandl smiled pleasantly. "There is no frailty here," he whispered with a narcissistic grin. His eyes narrowed dubiously as he took her bandaged hand, warming her cold fingers in the warmth of his touch. "The dark side beckons with the promise of easy gain; but there is always a price, always a tribute to its passion."

Fable swallowed, struggling to find her voice. "I... I," she stammered, "Lord Brandl, I need you... to..."

"Weigh your words carefully, young woman, do not waste time counting them." Turning to Jaalib, he gently pressed her toward his son. "Jaalib, take our guest to a comfortable room. She will stay the night."

Shoulders hunched in rage, Jaalib led Fable up the wide aisle, leading her out of the grand hall auditorium.

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An excruciating cramp in her leg brought Fable to consciousness. She bolted frantically from the bed, scanning the shadows for signs of movement. Taking her lightsaber from beneath the pillow, she assumed the ready stance, waiting for the unseen phantom to strike. But there were no shadows to fight, except her own. "No bad dreams?" Stiff from the close quarters of the X-wing, she felt surprisingly well and rested. Snorting softly, Fable

sat down on the bed. "No bad dreams!" she cheered into her pillow. Her optimism was short lived as a knock sounded at the door. Momentarily, the latch cleared and the door parted. Pulling the blanket over her body, Fable swallowed a moment of fear, relieved when Jaalib's brooding face peered into the chamber.

"The morning meal is ready," he growled.

"I'll be right there." As the door closed, she hurried from the bed and dressed quickly. Ignoring her flight jacket, she pulled the fine linen shirt over her head and shoulders, leaving the long ends to hang over her leggings. In the darkened corridor outside her room, Jaalib was waiting. "This way."

As the sweet aroma of sausage and boiling cereal filtered through her nostrils, Fable's stomach rumbled appreciatively. Painfully aware of her hunger and the young actor's annoyance, she waited for him to sit down at the small table. A series of large flame ovens lined the back of the room behind him. Fable waited until Jaalib took the first bite, then eagerly began filling her plate with steaming broth and several links of sausage.

Hearing only the clang of her utensils, she looked up to find Jaalib glaring at her. There was a deep-seated loathing behind his eyes. Gazing about the small, crude kitchen, she realized that they were alone. "Where is Lord Brandl?" she whispered, hoping he would ignore her.

"You shouldn't have come here!"

Piqued by his cruel tone, Fable slammed her fork against the plate. "Why don't you just butt out of it!"

"He won't help you," the actor snarled. "Others have come. Like you. So why don't you just get your things and I'll walk you back to your ship."

"I said, where is he?" Fable hissed with premeditated venom.

"He's in the Barrows," Jaalib relented. "He's been waiting for you."

"The Barrows?" she questioned around a mouthful of hot broth.

"The graveyard."

Outside in the cold dawn, storm clouds swept the sky. Wishing for her flight jacket, Fable shivered, hugging herself as the cool breeze fluttered through her hair and the thin fabric of her shirt. Trotting up the back landscape of steps and garden porches, she wandered into the rear courtyards of the theater, needing no specific direction to follow the dark presence of Lord Brandl. She followed a short path to the outskirts of Kovit, where the earth rose and fell in an irregular series of earthen mounds and grassy knolls. Up the steepest mound, she halted on the crest, finding herself surrounded by wax cylinders, hundreds of them, mounted atop slender pedestals, which were buried in the soft ground. Metallic ball bearings were precariously perched on each cylinder, giving the appearance of small, blue flames.

Across from her, on the opposite mound, Brandl stood with his back to her, at the foot of an enormous sarcophagus. The grainy image of a woman had been carved into the lid, delicately outlining the lace and fabric of the gown she was laid to rest in. "The Jedi is his own worst enemy," Brandl declared. "The greatest conflict comes from within. Our Masters teach us, scold us," he hesitated, "command us to follow reason, not our emotions."

"You disagree?" Fable asked, stepping into the center of the wax cylinders.

"Where there is smoke, there is fire." Brandl straightened, staring down his nose at her for a long moment. "Vialco is a coward. His tactics are mere illusions, prey for the weak-minded."

Brushing off the possible insult, Fable shrugged. "But he is powerful." Shaking her head remorsefully, she whispered, "I can't beat him. At least, I don't think so."

"Losing is not an option ... it's a conscious decision. You will not know until you try."

"Trying isn't good enough! I have to succeed or--"

"Or he may succeed in his attempts to lure you to the dark side? How do you know that I will not turn you?"

Fable felt a tremor down her back. "I don't."

"The student's greatest achievement is attained through succession," Brandl began, "a succession which requires the destruction of the Master. This is what the dark side teaches us. But what you must always remember is that when we embrace the darkness, we are already masters in the design of fate, humbling ourselves as students." He leaned heavily against the massive stone tomb. "When we seek the dark side, we seek our doom. Too often, we are successful."

"So you'll help me?"

"Vialco's undoing is inevitable. Even I have seen this."

"So I'll win, right?"

Brandl gently tugged at the clasp of his robe, loosening the collar. "If you're looking for visions; Fable, sit quietly and dwell on your past. Now prepare yourself. See the ball bearing directly ahead of you, sitting atop the wax cylinder? Draw your lightsaber and strike it. Destroy only the metal bearing. Leave the wax unharmed."

Fable hesitated, deliberately slow in assuming the ready stance. Breathing with effort, she stared at the ball bearing, her wounded hand tingling from her last experience with the lightsaber.

"The dark side's influence is stronger in moments of weakness. Do not let yourself be distracted. Now strike."

Fable drew the lightsaber from her belt, concentrating on its ignition. Swinging in a wide arc, she struck at the ball bearing, elated as it evaporated into nothingness, leaving the wax cylinder slightly scorched but unharmed. She disengaged the weapon and resumed the ready stance, unable to hide the arrogant smirk etched across her features.

"When climbing great mountains, it is always best to begin at a slow pace," Brandl remarked quietly. "Now strike for two." Without waiting to focus on the pedestal's position, she ignited the lightsaber and struck two blows, swinging the blade toward the ball bearings and disintegrating them as the cylinders remained untouched. Overwhelmed with confidence, she again disengaged the weapon and resumed the ready position, eager to begin the next phase. "No gain comes without a price. I will be your mentor and you my pupil. You will forever carry the distinguishment of my presence, as well as the taint," he stumbled over the word, "the traits of my own Masters."

"You mean the Emperor," Fable whispered, "don't you?"

"I chose the path that led me to this life," Brandl continued, "I will lead you on a parallel course, where I will show you the glories of the light and the majesty of the dark." He nodded, indicating the next alignment of wax cylinders. "Now strike for 10."

Fable faltered for a moment; then fresh with the assurance of her performance, she ignited the lightsaber and charged, working her way through the line. As she reached for the fourth cylinder, she felt herself floundering. Furiously struggling to the fifth, she sliced neatly through the cylinder and knocked the ball bearing at her feet. In a failed attempt to rally for the sixth, she tripped and fell into the wet earth, taking several stands and cylinders with her.

Brandl slowly descended from the mound, stepping just inside the perimeter of the training circle. Shamefully rising to her feet, Fable flinched as he drew his lightsaber and moved toward her. With a resonating power that spread out from it in all directions, the lightsaber became a smear of brilliance as Brandl worked his way through the wax cylinders. He destroyed one ball bearing after another, leaving no perceptible mark on the wax. Fable watched in awe as the weapon danced through a score or more of ball bearings before Brandl completed the cadence and disengaged the weapon. Gawking at the craftsmanship, she turned to Brandl. "You really are a Jedi Master."

"Only fools admire what they see," he hissed evenly, brushing past her. "I know... for once I was a fool." The first drops of rain began to fall, quickly covering the barrows with a slick film of water and loose earth. "You will continue this exercise until you have mastered it properly. Only then may you return to the theater."

"And if I can't," Fable insisted.

"You know where your ship is docked. Don't hesitate to go back to wherever it is you came from." He left her alone, with no further comment.

Nearly eight hours later, Fable walked through the stormy deluge of rain, listening to the frigid drops against her shoulders. Every chafing step brought her closer to the theater and closer to a temper tantrum of

monumental proportions. Jaalib was waiting for her at the door with a modest smile and a warm blanket. "He asks the impossible!" she hissed.

The actor draped the blanket over her shoulders. "Your dinner's getting cold."

Fable pushed through the door of her room, startled to find a heavy plasteel tub in the center of the floor, steaming with hot water. "A bath?" she whispered wearily. "Oh," she groaned, stumbling across the floor, discarding boots, socks, and belt as she moved across the room. About to pull the muddy shirt over her arms, Fable hesitated, feeling a draft from the door, where Jaalib stood, watching her. "Do you mind?"

Flushing with embarrassment, he stepped back into the shadows. "I'll bring your dinner later," he stammered and closed the door behind him.

* * *

As its orbital axis began its seasonal tilt, Trulalis was thrust into a tempestuous season of torrential rainfall and thunderstorms. Dawn showers became steady downpours by the afternoon, flooding the gutted lowlands with muddy water and the persistent rumble of thunder. Above the biting autumn breeze, the hum of a lightsaber was interrupted by the rattle of falling pedestals, wax cylinders, and ball bearings as Fable blundered through the exercise.

Brandl watched with mounting dissatisfaction. As the last pedestal fell to the saturated earth, he stormed down from his high mound. "You little fool! Do it again!"

Fable braced herself against the malevolent voice, glaring at the ground, too frightened to meet Brandl's cruel eyes. Despite a streak of improvement, she was steadily losing ground and his frustration was proof of that, as were the whispered obscenities spoken vehemently under his breath. She watched his broad, swaying shoulders as the Jedi Master started back up the mound to his stony, sarcophagus throne.

"How eager you young upstarts are to give yourself to the Force, demanding tribute from it, as if you were the source of the power. The Force does not thrive on the basis of whether you live or breathe! It exists because it has always been so! Begin again!"

Grateful to the rain for hiding her tears of humiliation, Fable tucked the lightsaber into her muddy leggings and started up the opposite mound. Defying Brandl's command, she headed for the dark solace of the theater, where Jaalib would be waiting for her with a warm blanket and a much needed kind word.

Enraged by her failure to comply, Brandl pursued her, throwing accusations and threats of retribution. Though Fable had seen only traces of it, she recognized the temperament and arrogance that must have been the beginning of Brandl's descent into the Emperor's power. And though she felt numb from the onslaught of his dreary emotions, she had transcended his mental barriers and become an admiring witness to the dedication and devotion that had kept him whole through the trial of his life. He was a man who would stop at nothing to accomplish his goals and he would kill her in an instant, if it so suited his purpose. And the time they had spent together, learning and growing, would hold no bearing on his decision. Sickened by the thought, Fable found herself in a position to admire and loathe the fallen Jedi.

Fable slowly pushed through the door of the theater. It was early and Jaalib was not there as she had expected. Emotionally spent and demoralized, she nearly collapsed right there at the threshold, desperate for the young actor's support after yet another dismal day of training. As she stepped from the rain, Brandl was right behind her with another scathing assault. "The Force is your enemy! Turn your back on it and it will destroy you! It is your lover! Lust for it! Spurn it and it will devour you in fire. But go to it, as a child to its mother, make yourself humble before the omnipotence of its existence and it will guide you beyond the shallow confines of this mortal world!"

Alarmed by the commotion, Jaalib hurried into the antechamber, placing himself between Fable and his father. Bordering on obvious hysteria, she stumbled into his arms, dampening his shoulder with well-deserved tears. Putting the blanket over Fable's trembling shoulders, Jaalib gently sent her off to her room: "Your bath is waiting," he whispered quietly. "I'll be there in a moment."

Waiting for the girl's shadow to dissipate in the adjoining darkness, Brandl hissed, "She's impossible!"

"Odd," Jaalib chuckled, handing his father a steaming cup of broth, "she said the same about you."

"She is so charged with emotion and sentiment!" he growled, allowing his emotions to show through the aloof veneer. "It's as if your mother never--" his voice broke off abruptly, "as if your mother never left us."

"She didn't leave us," Jaalib replied matter-of-factly. "She died, defending me from stormtroopers. Stormtroopers and Jedi hunters who came looking for you." He sniffed at the absurdity of his mother's devotion to the man that had abandoned them, only to return eight years later, bringing the darkness of his life with him. "When they didn't find you, they found a way to justify the cost of their visit by obliterating the village."

"Courtesy costs little, Edjian-Prince, and discourtesy can rob even the richest man of his fortune."

Feigning anger, Jaalib drew away from his father, recognizing the famous line. "Courtesy?" he declared impishly. "Then no more call me Edjian-Prince. Dress me in rags and let me be a poor, rude man."

Brandl's face brightened with the spontaneous performance. "You've been practicing! Excellent! You're finding the right voice for the part. Come," he whispered eagerly, pulling Jaalib against him, "we should use this moment to complete the final act." Together, they vanished into the shadows of an adjoining corridor.

* * *

Relaxed and warm beneath the downy comforters, Fable resisted the notion of rising. She laid very still, waiting for the inevitable knock on the door. "Come in."

"You're awake?" Jaalib remarked, peering inside.

"I'm usually awake," she chuckled. "I just pretend to be asleep so you'll feel sorry for me."

"Why would you want me to feel sorry for you?"

"Come on," she rolled her eyes. "Your father is the most difficult man I've ever known, Jaalib." Sitting up on her elbows, she teased, "Look what I've been going through and then tell me you don't feel some sympathy."

"Consider yourself fortunate. He was a lot worse, believe me."

"Worse?" she scoffed. "What do you mean?"

"In the last five years, he had to be a father, a mother," Jaalib sighed sadly, "as well as a mentor. It changed him."

"I knew I would have to work hard," Fable said, "but I was certain that all the work would be keeping him from luring me to the dark side."

"Has he tried?"

"I don't think so. Every time I feel it coming on, he stops me and tells me to make the right choice. My choice." She yawned, throwing the comforter to the side. "I'd better go."

"My father's not here," Jaalib said. "He's going to be away for a few days; so there's no training, unless you do it on your own." He forced himself to face her openly, allowing himself only the solace of the shadows about them to conceal his apprehension. "I was hoping you might go on a picnic with me. To make up for my behavior."

"Your behavior?"

"You remember, when you first arrived." He laughed softly. "I all but attacked you. It was inexcusable."

"And perfectly justified. You were protecting the person who is most important to you. I would have done nothing less." Patting the side of the bed, she beckoned him to sit down beside her. "My mother was a Jedi. She trained my father and then watched him die at the hands of a rival. After that, we spent most of our time running from the Emperor." Fable shook her head sadly. "I was only a baby, but I remember it well. Living with a Jedi," she paused thoughtfully, "you learn to hide your emotions, especially the hurtful ones. My mother never knew how I felt." Fable sighed as the strain of those emotions returned. "Then one day, I picked up a lightsaber and let go!" She giggled. "I don't know who was more surprised, my mother or me. That's when I began my training, whether I liked it or not." Fable shrugged away the arduous memories. "Now about that picnic, I'm starving."

"We'll have to hike, I'm afraid. The Empire didn't leave much behind in the way of transportation. Not even a bantha. Do you mind?"

"It'll be relaxing. Come on."

The Khoehng Heights were located nearly five kilometers outside the perimeter of the Kovit Settlement. Long overgrown by wild wheat, the trail leading into the mountain pass had narrowed, no longer marked with the footsteps of the farmers who once tended them. It was a rare, clear morning. Storm clouds loomed in the distance, held back by a persistent wave of warm breezes blowing through the lowlands. From the Heights, Fable scanned the panoramic view of the countryside. She could see the winding trail that led into the base of the lower mountains. The footpath climbed to give her inquisitive eyes the full benefit of the view.

Fable sighed with immeasurable pleasure, her stomach full of warm sweet cakes and honeysticks. She endured Jaalib's gentle caress at her cheek, as he playfully wiped the excess sweet powder from her face. "I've been in space too long," she whispered, taking a deep breath. "It's so beautiful here."

"After they left," Jaalib whispered, "we were cut off. No supplies, no medicinal goods, nothing. There was plenty of food ready for harvesting, but there was no one left to do it."

Fable hummed a melancholy tune. Shivering in the mountain air, she turned to Jaalib and held his gaze as he draped his cloak over her shoulders. "Why do they call this place the Khoehng Heights. Is that Old Corellian?"

"There's an outdoor theater built into the side this mountain," he replied, indicating a slight, stony ridge. "This place is named for the first play that ever performed there nearly 500 years ago."

"Five hundred years ago?" she gasped.

"*Uhl Eharl Khoehng*. Khoehng is Old Corellian for king. The eharl comes from Socorran mythology." He shrugged uncertainly. "It means elf or trickster."

Reminded of her Socorran companion, Deke, Fable felt a pang of remorse for leaving him. Her thoughts were abruptly diverted by a clap of thunder overhead. The skies released a deluge of cold rain. Frantically gathering the blankets and remaining baskets of food, Fable held onto Jaalib's hand as they sprinted over the ridge. Their voices and laughter reverberated against the hollowed side of the mountain, as they slid down the precarious face of the moss-covered bank and into the shadowy protection of the antiquated theater.

An overhanging eave of solid rock covered the main stage and the first few rows of the audience pit. Cobwebbed and damp, the ancient structure stood in a silent tribute to its creators. Ragged tapestries hung from the rock walls, covered with mold, grime, and clay from the decaying structure. A few prop swords and robes were arranged on the inner panels of the stage and a multitude of candles and pedestals stood to either side of the audience pit, centuries-old relics left behind by a more playful, tolerant age.

"I used to come here as a boy," Jaalib confessed. Extending his arms to either side, he declared, "Now this was true theater, by candlelight, in an age which understood and coveted its artisans."

"*Uhl Eharl Khoehng*," Fable whispered dubiously. "What's it about?"

"It opens on a distant world, in a kingdom built in the center of a dark forest. After many years of ruling this kingdom, the good, wise king dies, and his handsome son," Jaalib winked, "the Edjian-Prince, takes the throne."

"I thought you said this was a tragedy."

"It is a tragedy," Jaalib scolded, "and that becomes apparent when the Edjian-Prince decides to expand the kingdom and begins sending expeditions into the forest to mark trees for felling. The men he sent never returned." He narrowed his eyes, moving his face very close to hers. "And that is when the older folk began whispering about *Uhl Eharl Khoehng*."

"Stop it!" Fable hissed, batting his hands away as he tried to frighten her.

"The Edjian-Prince was intrigued. He began sending daily messengers into the forest, carrying his invitation to the Eharl Khoehng to dine with him in the palace. None returned. When there were no more messengers, he sent small armies, keeping only the best and strongest warriors to guard the kingdom. They did not return. When the townspeople demanded a halt to this dangerous ambition, the Edjian-Prince ordered his remaining army to drive them all into the forest. None, not even the soldiers, were heard from again." Lighting two candles, he moved the pedestals into the center of the stage. "Only the Edjian-Prince and his faithful old hunt servant remained."

"He sent the old man?" Slapping Jaalib's thigh, Fable hissed, "This is a terrible story! What happened to the Edjian-Prince after the old man left?"

"When his servant did not return, the Edjian-Prince barricaded himself in the palace. Without his armies or his subjects, there was nothing to stop the Eharl Khoehng from attacking. One quiet night," Jaalib whispered, "the Eharl Khoehng did come, invading the Edjian-Prince's dreams. He promised safe passage through the forest. Eager to make peace, the Edjian-Prince went into the wood, where he remained for nearly a decade."

"What!"

"The Eharl Khoehng tricked him. While he did have safe passage through the forest, food, clothing, and shelter, the Eharl Khoehng held him prisoner, using illusions to trap him in the labyrinth of the forest." Jaalib blew out one of the candles. "Ten years of guilt took its toll. The prince thought he heard the voices of his subjects crying out to him. Then one day, he was startled by the spirit of his beloved huntsman. The old man reported that the Eharl Khoehng had turned the townspeople into trees and left them there in the woods, conscious, but unable to move or speak, except when the wind blew through their branches."

"And then?"

"And then," Jaalib whispered, "unaffected by the Eharl Khoehng's illusions, the huntsman led his master on a journey to the outer edge of the forest, where the Eharl Khoehng was waiting for them." A malevolent shadow fell over his face as Jaalib stepped into the center of the stage, posing beside the lit candle. "'Worship me and call me master and all that I have shall be yours, including your kingdom,' the Eharl Khoehng said."

"And what did the Edjian-Prince do?"

"He went mad," Jaalib began in the narrative voice. "He ran back into the wood and set fire to it. By the time he was finished, there was nothing left, not one tree. 'This is the only kingdom I deserve to rule,' he declared, 'and the only kingdom that the Eharl Khoehng can claim.' " Taking one of the blackened tapestries from the wall, he threw the thick material over his left shoulder and continued the narration. "Dressed in the rags of his former life, hands and face blackened with soot, the Edjian-Prince went before the Eharl Khoehng, falling to his knees in homage. In his loudest, most humble voice, he cried, 'Long ... live ... the king.' "

Visibly moved, Fable applauded, shaking her head with wonderment. "Your father played that part?"

"The Edjian-Prince was my father's greatest role," Jaalib said absently. "No one has been able to bring the same dignity to the role." He sat down on the edge of the stage. "And when the time is right, we'll produce it again and I will be the Edjian-Prince and he shall be my nemesis, *Uhl Eharl Khoehng* himself."

Fable chewed anxiously at her lower lip. "Jaalib, why didn't you become a Jedi?"

"All I ever wanted to be was an actor," he remarked, swinging his legs against the stage. "And that's exactly what I've become. I've learned the lightsaber and other meditations of the Jedi, mostly to appease my troubled sense of loyalty. Beyond these, my father seems reluctant to teach me anymore. And I'm reluctant to ask."

Staring the rows of candles, Fable was reminded of the wax cylinder exercise. "The lightsaber exercise, the one using the ball bearings? Can you do it with candles?"

Jaalib shrugged. "That's how he taught me. I never used the wax cylinders until much later."

"Can you show me your secret? Your execution is almost flawless, elegant and equally effective."

Assembling the pedestals in the familiar circle, Jaalib motioned for her to step inside the exaggerated diameter. "May I?" he teased, gently embracing her from behind. He placed his hands on top of hers and ignited the lightsaber. The elongated shaft pulsed with magnificence and power, throwing light across the stage and the first few benches in the pit. Fable stiffened for a moment, feeling his body so intimately against her. But as he guided her through a slow rotation with the lightsaber, she relaxed and concentrated on his directives. "What do you see?" he whispered.

Staring down the line of unlit candles, Fable's eyes traced the straight, angular path. "No," Jaalib whispered, reading the expression of her body. "This is why you're having such a hard time."

"You've been watching me?" she hissed, elbowing him in the ribs.

Jaalib laughed softly. "You're trying to think in linear terms; spatial dimensions. It's not like flying a starship. You can train your eyes, which you've done quite well; but sooner or later, he'll catch you." Moving her gently to the side, he added, "You may let your eyes dictate where the lines begin, but let the Force guide you. It's not like clearing a room and then moving on to the next. There is no sequence, except the one you create as you move along. There are always several paths, right to left, top to bottom, any combination."

He removed the lightsaber from her hands and began the cadence. His movements were slow and deliberate so that she could follow him; but even these motions were faster than her most frenzied attempts to complete the exercise. As the lightsaber swept over the tops of the candles, the small wicks exploded with flame; but the wax tips remained unscarred by the weapon. Quickly moving around the circle to blow out the flames, Jaalib handed the lightsaber back to her. "Now you try."

Fable swallowed doubtfully, wondering how she would follow such a flawless performance. Igniting the lightsaber, her eyes traced the several lines of candles as they extended out in every direction. She arced swiftly through the circle, feeling the confidence of her former self return. Ten, fifteen, eighteen. As she reached the last movements of the cadence, she lost control, pitching forward as she spun frantically on her heels.

"Easy," Jaalib crooned, catching her in his arms. "You were doing wonderfully until you lost your concentration." Blowing out the candles, he said, "Try again. And this time, remember, the Force is a waterfall. Nothing can stop or turn it off. Nothing can divert the flow." Scolding her with a stern finger, he added, "Doubt and uncertainty form barriers, but only if you let them."

"Now you're starting to sound like your father."

In response, he bowed ceremoniously, then motioned toward the candles. This time, as she moved through the circle, Fable allowed the rain to guide and open her to the Force. The steady beat of the drops against the stone benches steadied her concentration and she completed the cadence without incident.

She disengaged the lightsaber, trembling slightly as she turned from the center of the circle. The Force was flowing through her, still channeling her conscious mind. Jaalib was behind her and Fable could feel his heart racing above the gentle vibrations of the Force. Before her nerve could fail, Fable turned and kissed him passionately.

"Shall we try it again?" he whispered.

"Rogue!"

Jaalib grinned, winking mischievously. "The cadence, I mean." His grin deepened as he stepped into the circle and began to blow out the candles.

* * *

The Force was with her and Fable felt it, flowing through her mind and body. She imaged the power channeling through her arms and hands and grasped the lightsaber from her belt. Visualizing the path in her mind, she moved through a series of precise parries and feints, disintegrating the first several balls with faultless execution. As she began the second half of the cadence, Brandl whispered, "Execute each motion as though it were your last. Someday, your life may depend on it. Or the lives of others."

For nearly two hours, Fable worked through the first cadence and was moving onto the second. Obviously fatigued, she began making poor judgment errors and scorched the tops of the last ten cylinders, slicing through the last one at the conclusion. She stepped back into the ready stance, gasping for breath.

"As you progress, you will learn the limits of your abilities," Brandl stated. "You are excused for the remainder of the day."

Bowing respectfully, Fable pulled her jacket from a nearby branch and started on the trail back to the theater. Jaalib was waiting for her with a sweet cake and the promise of a bath and a kiss. "How did it go?"

"I made it to the second cadence!" she whispered with excitement. "And Jaalib, I think I saw him smile."

"Now *that* is good news."

Glancing over her shoulder, she winked at him. "I think I'll go to bed early tonight, as a reward. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Father and I are working on the last act of the play." He smiled pleasantly, betraying his affection. "See you in the morning."

* * *

Fable awoke to a terrible sense of foreboding. Quickly dressing, she sat tentatively at the edge of the bed, hugging her knees against her chest as she scanned the shadows. Something was terribly wrong and she could

feel it. Cradling the lightsaber in her lap, she took a deep breath, assured that she was ready for the worst, whatever that may be, whenever it might come.

The familiar knock came at her door. "Come in," she replied, eager to share her concerns with Jaalib. But as the door opened, she was greeted by the foreboding shadow of her mentor. "Where's Jaalib?"

"Jaalib is the one and only treasure left to my miserable existence," Brandl snarled. "I forbid this to happen. I forbid it!"

"Where is he? I want to talk to him!"

Advancing into the room, Brandl cornered her. "The theater on Iscera will be opening in a few days. I sent him there to make preparations for our production. By the time he returns, you will be gone.

Fable followed Brandl into the corridor with heavy, angry strides, allowing her emotions to seethe within her. On the verge of a temper tantrum, she braced herself as common sense called on her to reason. She had come to Trulalis to improve herself, to get an edge on the enemy who pursued her, and then to return, if possible, to her friends in the Rebel Alliance. Falling in love had no place in that design.

Brandl set a bowl of steaming broth at the end of the table and sat down on the opposite end. Fable slammed herself into the stool, barely able to curb her temper. "So what's it like to be a pawn for the Emperor!"

"I brought pleasure to my master through the tears of his subjects." Momentarily distracted by the sincerity of the spontaneous soliloquy, Brandl stared into his bowl. Recovering his cynicism, he glared across the small table. "The Emperor's ideas are quite noble: It's his methods which eventually offend those of lesser vision."

"Sounds like you're still loyal to him." Through narrowed eyes, she retaliated, "Why not, he only tried to kill you."

"In time, you will learn that an old friend is very much like a good mirror. The longer you stare into it, the harder it is to find the flaws."

A shrill whine echoed from high above, sending a peculiar reverberation through the theater. Fable felt a chill as her ears recognized the distinct sounds of a shuttle flying overhead. Its exhaust boosters could be heard above the whine of the ion drive, as the pilot circled, looking for an appropriate place to land. "That's Vialco. Isn't it?"

Brandl closed his eyes and was silent. Fable straightened her shoulders as she rose from the table, turning her back on the Jedi. "No more bad dreams," she whispered with firm resolve and stepped from the shadows of the theater into the dawn. Her body knew every hollow and rise in the unmarked trail that led to the picturesque grounds of Kovit's graveyard. She stared across the entrance mound to where Vialco stood among the tarnished graves and markers. For a moment, the fear and horror of their first encounter returned in full force.

"You've matured much faster than I expected," Vialco declared. "I never imagined Lord Brandl to be such a gracious host."

Vialco walked among the raised tombs, brushing his gloved hands over the rough-hewn stone, as if drawing power from the shadows lurking at the site of each grave. His face was gangly and angular, unattractive, with gaunt cheeks and unusually large brows. Sensing her peripheral thoughts, he whispered, "No, no more bad dreams, girl. I've come for the harvest." A sinister determination shadowed his pallid face. "What shall it be, hmm?"

Fable shifted her weight to one foot, cocking her hip arrogantly. As Vialco ignited his lightsaber, she calmly drew her own, assuming the ready stance. She parried his first, preemptive attempts to break through her defenses, losing no ground to him, and met his surprise with a coy smile.

"We are much improved," he commented. "Have I left too much time for you to prepare?"

"Lord Brandl did say you were a coward," Fable taunted. "But I already knew that."

Vialco's face flushed with rage as he began a series of short lunges, forcing Fable to move back along the perimeter of the muddy basin. Feinting to the left, she swung around behind him, delivering a swift kick to Vialco's behind. Enraged by her insolence, Vialco turned on her, gripping the lightsaber tightly in his hands. Deliberately stretching her defenses, he attempted to penetrate her confidence.

"Fable?"

Fable heard the soft-spoken voice from the past; and without turning toward the shadowy image on the edge of her peripheral vision, she knew the illusion to be Arecelis. The image waved and laughed, sounding intimately like her dead friend. "No," Fable whispered, "no, I don't think so, Vialco. I saw what you did to him. I saw it!" she seethed. The tip of her lightsaber sliced easily through the shoulder of his cloak. "And that was your first mistake."

"And my second?"

"Letting me live to remember it!" She lunged savagely at him, knocking Vialco against the tomb of Brandl's wife. Breaking off the assault, she somersaulted back down into the depression. Disengaging her lightsaber, she stood there defiantly. "Shall I play with you like you played with him?"

"Wretched girl!" Vialco hissed, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. "If you will not be turned, you will die!" Summoning the corrupt powers of the dark side, Vialco felt the energy coursing through him. He extended his arms, curling his fingertips as the first tendrils of lightning surged from his hands.

Fable flinched, awkwardly balanced as she tried to back away. The arc of lightning shot through her, ripping into her flesh. Screaming in pain, she dropped to the ground, curling into a fetal ball as the agony washed through her. Before she could collect herself, a second and third blow left her tortured body temporarily paralyzed.

"Have we come so far to fall so low?" Vialco taunted. "Tsk, ts, what a pity," he smacked his thin lips.

Reeling with the corrupt power surge, Fable jumped to her feet. As Vialco took aim, she somersaulted, voicing a shrill squeal of effort as the pulse of electricity cuffed her shoulder. Wielding the lightsaber in both hands, she began the subtle movements of the first cadence. As each tendril of lightning arced at her, she swept the blade of the lightsaber across it, effectively deflecting it. She imagined that each arc was a new series of lines. Each point was the metal reflection of a ball bearing, the shiny wick of a candle.

Twenty, thirty... she lost count of the number of successful deflections. Even as the crescent of lightning arced behind her, slipping in above her head, she simply brought the lightsaber over her shoulder into its path. Never turning to look, her body reacted as her eyes designed the next path.

Fable fought her way to the top of the mound. Knocking Vialco from his feet, she pushed him down into the depression. She watched in horror as the tendrils of lightning rebelled against their master, burning through his clothing and flesh. He lurched for his lightsaber and fumbled, knocking the weapon out of reach. "Have we come so far to lie so low?" Fable mocked. She slid down the face of the mound, raising her lightsaber to finish him.

Vialco cowered below her, writhing in the mud. Something in his groveling manner made Fable hesitate, dropping her arms to chest height, as the lightsaber hummed insistently in her hands.

"Will you give him the chance to betray you again?" Keeping her eyes on Vialco, Fable felt the dark presence of her master. "Kill him and be done with it," Brandl whispered. "Only then will you know that the nightmare is over."

Fable disengaged the lightsaber and turned to her Jedi mentor. "It is over. Why kill him?"

"Remember what he is and what he has done. He will betray your dreams, as he has done before, and use them to his advantage. End the nightmare, Fable. Kill him."

Fable heard the pulse of the lightsaber before she saw it. Wondering how Vialco had gotten hold of his weapon without her sensing it, she whirled, igniting her lightsaber. Vialco arced his blade toward her vulnerable legs. In a wild strike, she severed his head from the shoulders, never losing momentum. But as he fell, she clearly saw his empty hands. The lightsaber was still on the ground, several meters from his body.

"Who's tricking who?" Fable hissed, enraged by Brandl's careful deceit. Lunging toward her mentor, she met the abrupt thrust of his lightsaber. Dominating and powerful, he knocked Fable off of her feet and drove her back into the opposite mound. "You lied to me!" she gasped, weakly rubbing her bruised cheek. "What have you done?"

"I have set your place at the Emperor's table," Brandl replied. "Soon, I shall again stand at my master's side and you shall stand beside me." He glared down at her, mocking the injury in her eyes. "You knew there would be a price."

"What price?"

Brandl smiled, posing arrogantly for his small audience. Offering his hand, he whispered, "Worship me and call me master and all that I have shall be yours, including Jaalib's affections. There's no use fighting it, Fable. Accept and you will be well cared for, this I promise, you." Brandl turned to leave. "Don't bother running to your ship. Thermal detonators are rather effective tools." Gently caressing the scars at his temple, he chuckled, "I should know."

* * *

Locked in her room, Fable rocked quietly from side to side, wiping tears on her sleeve. Her fingers were blood-covered and black with grime, the nails shredded from a recent tantrum at the site of her X-wing. In an attempt to avoid her impending fate, she had fled to the vessel and found the gutted remains of her starfighter in a blackened blast diameter. Only the central frame of the X-wing had survived the initial blast. Vialco's shuttle was also consumed by the explosion, strewn across a sunken depression of scorched earth. Cursing Brandl, she rocked faster and harder, desperate to find some way to escape him.

The door opened slowly, a small crack that grew larger as the hunched figure skulked into the room. Fable's eyes brightened immediately, recognizing the face. "Jaalib," she whispered, swept into his arms. "Your father's--"

"Shh, I know," he hushed. Sitting down on the bed beside her, he gently pulled her trembling body against him. "I just happened to go over my ship's back-up logs and discovered my father's side trip to Byss."

"Byss?"

"The Emperor's pleasure world. I hurried back as soon as I could and found what was left of your X-wing. Wasn't hard to figure out the next scene." He picked up a small satchel of her things and threw it over his shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"You're leaving," he replied curtly. "Don't talk. Don't think. Don't even breathe heavy or he'll find us."

"He'll know eventually, as soon as we step outside this theater."

"And that doesn't give us much time," he argued. "So just run."

Following the trail out of the settlement, Jaalib jogged toward the mountain range, using the jutting lip of the Khoehng Heights as a guide beneath the moonlit skies of Trulalis. Fable matched his earnest strides and together they ran the short kilometer to the wheat field, where a familiar ship was waiting for them.

"The *Prodiga*!" she screamed. "Deke!"

"Heard you got yourself in a spot of trouble," the Socorran grumbled with relief. "Didn't think I'd let you go down alone, did you?" Hearing a proximity alarm from within the ship, Deke nodded to Jaalib. "I set the sensors just like you said." He eyed his ship dubiously. "Something or somebody just tripped the perimeter sensor."

"It's him," Fable trembled, casting her gaze to the far off theater steeple.

"Then you had better go," Jaalib whispered.

"What about you?" Fable protested. "Come with us."

"He's my father, Fable. It's not that easy."

"And you call this easy?" she croaked, tears in her voice. Seeing the denial in his eyes, Fable pleaded, "Jaalib--"

Cutting off her objections with a kiss, Jaalib gently crowded her toward the ship. "For once in your life, listen and go before he gets here."

"But--"

"No, Fable!" Jaalib hissed. "You're nothing but a consolation prize to the Emperor!"

"He's right, capt'n," Deke insisted. "Time to bail."

Desperately appealing to her defiant eyes, Jaalib grinned, anxious to subdue her temper. "I was born to play this role, remember? I am the Edjian-Prince." Swallowing his sorrow, he embraced her warmly. "It's the last act, Fable. I have to burn the forest down now."

"Then burn it," she sobbed, cradling her head against his shoulder.

"I can't. Not while you're still here."

Fable stumbled up the ramp and cued the hatch controls. Leaning heavily on the secured door, she wiped absently at a tear, sensing the warmth of Jaalib's touch on her cheek.

Shielding his eyes from the freighter's exhaust, Jaalib stepped back into the swaying fields of wheat. Engines glowing red with the strain of sudden acceleration, the *Prodigal* banked sharply against the foot of the mountains, carrying Fable away. Lightning signaled her departure, bringing on a deluge of cold, cold rain. Jaalib took a deep breath, bracing himself for the wrath of the brooding presence slowly moving up behind him.

Brandl briefly glanced up, searching for some signs of Fable -- his squandered prize. There were none and his austere gaze fell heavily on Jaalib. "Arrogant, deceitful child," he snarled.

Feeling the subtle constriction of his throat, Jaalib resisted panic as his wind pipe contracted, seized by invisible fingers. "No less arrogant than my father," he rasped. Desperate for air, he dropped to his knees, slowly losing consciousness as the grip tightened about his throat. His father abruptly released him and the cool, damp air flowed into his body.

Staring after the retreating figure of his father, Jaalib staggered precariously. Compelled to follow, he screamed, "Long ... live ... the king!"